ERASMUS STUDENTS AS TOURISTS: FROM LEISURE TRAVELERS TO BRAND ADVOCATES OF THE HOST COUNTRY?

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is one of the most important factors in the global economy. The use of knowledge contributes to the productivity of a country, to the strengthening of economic, social and political power. Higher education is an important factor in global competitiveness, both on a personal level and on a county level. Students choose institutions based on quality, value and offered opportunities. Exchange programs for university students and staff members is a way to interchange knowledge and resources. The Erasmus Exchange Program is a popular opportunity for individuals to gain new professional and personal experiences and participate in leisure activities, and a way for host countries to build their images in the academic field.

As Erasmus Programs can last up to 12 months, during these mobility periods, students tend to focus more on the social and leisure part of the exchange program, rather on the professional part (Marin-Pantelescu, 2022). Previous research (Kosmaczewska, 2015, Leutwyler & Meierhans, 2023, Mucsi et al., 2020a, Mucsi et al., 2020b, Hetesi and Kéri, 2018) examined the motivating factors that influences the students during their destination choice. Other studies (Gracía-Rodríguez & Jiménez, 2015; Csapó & M. Császár, 2021; Amaro et al., 2019; Kéri, 2021; Filipe et al., 2020; Bifkovics et al,

2020) examined the benefits for the host countries. Mobile students contribute to the local economy through their living expenses, and through tourism spendings. Another benefit is the way they increase the number of visitors in the destination.

However, there is a limited number of studies on the relationship between destinations and foreign students, as brand advocates. Erasmus students may recommend the host country to their friends and family, and to their followers through their online social media presence. If done correctly, this can contribute to the development of a more positive image of the county and to the increase of tourists and international students. This research presents a comprehensive literature review to understand Erasmus mobility exchange students as tourists and as brand advocates. The study aims to examine the students' choices, motivations, their tourist behavior, and the potential impacts on the promotion of the host country. The findings of this research provide an insight on how Erasmus students can be advocates for their host countries and contribute to promoting Hungary as a tourism destination.

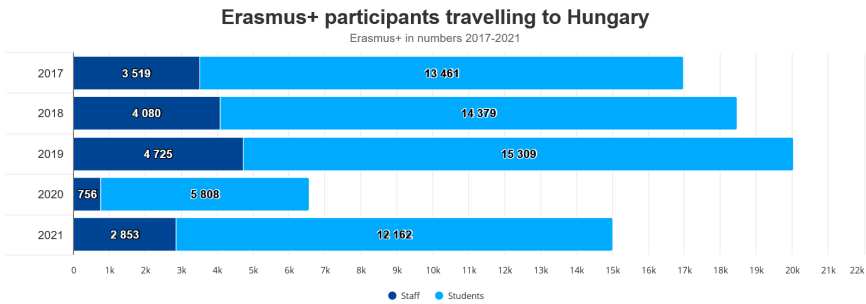
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ERASMUS

The new Erasmus Program, the Erasmus+ (2021-2027) promotes and encourages student mobility and cooperation in the fields of education, training, youth, and sport. The scholarship allows students to spend a three to twelve months period in another country as exchange students, promoting a dialogue of sharing ideas, knowledge, and innovation. The program supports international cooperation between educational institutions to increase the exchange of best practices and improve social cohesion (European Commission, 2022a). It is important to add that the program's priorities include but are not limited to the inclusion of diversity, digital transformation, fight against climate change, participation in democratic life, and common values (European Commission, 2022b).

Any student who is enrolled at a higher education institution and qualified for the requirements (e.g. studying for an official degree,

have completed the first year…), and any professionals involved in education, training, and youth can take part in the Erasmus Program. The throughout the duration of the exchange, the students benefit from a scholarship from the European Union for which they have to obtain a certain amount of credit (European Commission, 2022a).

1. Figure – Erasmus+ inbound students to Hungary



Source: European Commission, 2021a

In 2021, the most visited countries for the exchange program were Spain (77,406 students, 13,616 staff), Italy (52,022 students, 11,392 staff) and France (36,418 students, 5427 staff). While Hungary is certainly not among the most popular destinations, 12,162 students and 2853 staff members took part in the mobility and chose it as their host county (European Commission, 2021a). The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative effect on the mobility program in 2020. The numbers were only 33% of the numbers in 2019. Even in 2021, they were not up to the previous years', but it shows that the students want to utilize the opportunity as much as possible (European Commission, 2021b). The students during the first wave of the pandemic did not realize its possible consequences, and they had to face with sudden changes. It interrupted the physical mobility; some had to leave the host country, and some could not even go to the chosen destination. Still, the Erasmus mobility program did not stop, and students were able to complete the courses online (Koris et al., 2021).

The receiving countries gain many benefits from hosting students from abroad; economic, and social as well (Amaro et al., 2019; Oborune, 2013), while the participants – both students and teaching staff – see a positive impact on their academic development and professional careers (Engel, 2010). Furthermore, Erasmus Program has a positive influence on European identity and loyalty (Amaro et al., 2019). Aside from the conventional education the students receive, it is an opportunity for networking, studying language, and participating in leisure and tourism activities.

THE MOTIVATION OF THE STUDENTS

According to McMahon (1992, cited in Mucsi et al., 2020a), the motivation for exchange students may come from the wish to study abroad (push), or from the image and attractiveness of the destination (pull). The countries themselves are unable to influence the push factors, however, they can compete against each other in order to attract students with the pull factors (eg. effective country brand) (Kosmaczewska, 2015).

The motivations of the students can not only be described with the push-pull factors, but also with other categorizations. Leutwyler & Meierhans (2013) used "broadening personal horizons", "practicing and developing foreign language skills", "interest in people from other cultures", "studying as an investment", "getting to know another country", "improving one's career", "experiencing new things", "wanting to become self-sufficient", "needing to be away from home", and "relative living in the destination" as the reasons for participating in the Erasmus Program, Mucsi et al. (2020b) categorized the factors into six different groups. These are: social coercion, cost-effective education, career development, deepening of studies, getting to know the country, and gaining life experience. Said categories may overlap, but the dominant factor is the one influencing the overall experience of student mobility.

Furthermore, the motivations may also include an increase in employment prospects and the lack of educational options in the home

country (World Tourism Organization, 2016). The predominance of some areas where the number of Erasmus students is higher indicates that the foreign experiences are more valued in some professions (Carneiro & Malta, 2007) and that it would lead to a better chance at employment since Erasmus students can use the gained knowledge and competence as an advantage over other applicants (Cvikl & Artič, 2013).

1. Table – Motivations of Erasmus+ students

Categorization	**Social aspects**	**Attractiveness of the destination**	**Internal aspects**
Motivational factors	meeting with people from other cultures	getting to know a country better	broadening personal horizons
	studying, as an investment	unique characteristics of the destination	learning new languages
	career development	leisure activities	experiencing new things
	friends and family living abroad	cost-effective opportunity	wanting self-sufficiency
	peer imitation/ coersion	university's image	need to be away from home
	new work opportunities	cultural environment	

Source: Own creation based on Leutwyler and Meierhans, 2013; Mucsi et al, 2020b; Carneiro and Malta, 2007; Cvikl and Artič, 2013; Rodríguez et al., 2011; Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe, 2008; Hetesi and Kéri, 2018

Other motivations relate to the unique characteristics of the chosen destination, such as geographical proximity, economic level, and climate. In some cases, the university's location can also be a deciding factor, if the location helps them realize their mobility aims, which leads to the conclusion that distance is inversely related to student mobility. Students may lean towards Mediterranean countries than places with colder climates (Rodríguez et al., 2011). Other authors noted that the destination can be selected based on leisure activities and overall city, or country image as well (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008).

According to a study on the foreign students' motivation to study in Hungary, these motivation factors are general. Hetesi and Kéri (2018) found that students seek cultural experiences, want to develop new social contacts and wish to improve their personal and educational prospects.

Overall, it can be said that the process of choosing a destination can depend on various factors. It can vary from person to person based on their own priorities in life, but there are common motives. The social and internal motives cannot be influenced by the host country, but the attractiveness of the destination can be heightened by a careful branding strategy.

COUNTRY AND CITY BRANDING AND ERASMUS

Country branding is not only a way to attract tourists to the destination, but to attract investors, to increase the export of national products to other countries, to develop a positive image, and to attract talents to study and stay in the country (Papp-Váry, 2018).

Juvan and Lesjak (2013) noted a slight relationship between the level of GPA and the host city's reputation as a party or culture city. Students with lower GPAs plan to enjoy themselves during the Erasmus period, while students with high GPAs are more partial toward historical cities with rich cultural life. This leads to the conclusion that country and city branding is a notable aspect when students are choosing their destination.

As stated in Malota's research (2016), Hungary is a suitable educational tourism destination, based on the offered academic programs, teaching methods, online tools used in courses, academic prestige, the support of establishing a relationship with other students, mentor assistance, university sport, accommodation, and systematic payment of scholarship. It is notable that based on the Good Country Index, in Science and Technology (which consist of the number of the international students, journal exports, international publications, Nobel prizes and patents), Hungary is ranked as second out of 169 countries (The Good Country Index, 2023).

In Berács and Malota's (2007) research, the things that came to the minds of those foreign students who were already studying in Hungary about the country were related to geographical (e.g. the location), human (e.g. the traits of Hungarian people), and cultural (e.g. gastronomy) characteristics, but there were responses connected to tourism (e.g. thermal baths), economy (e.g. economic development), and other responses that cannot be categorized.

The students who are pursuing their studies abroad have to face several difficulties outside of the academic ones in the host country. In most cases, the greater the compromise they have to make to start their studies abroad, the greater the compulsion to excel (Mucsi et al., 2020a). Foreign students who chose to study abroad in order to gain life experience, or to get to know the host country better, tend to perceive any difficulties as a challenge instead of obstacles, and they might even increase their satisfaction (Mucsi et al., 2019).

The new environment in Hungary can come as a surprise for the foreign students. The cultural and personal differences, the attitudes of the citizens, the different societal roles and housing situations, the transport problems, or other types of difficulties may affect their wish to come back and visit the country as tourist. These can deter them from returning to the country, and/or from recommending Hungary to their acquaintances and friends as a tourist destination (Malota & Mucsi, 2019). Moreover, students, who experienced helpful treatment during the problems they had to face in the host country, would be more inclined to return, while those who encountered people with a negative attitude, would be significantly less likely to

return (Malota, 2016). The success of a destination hinges on its ability to establish a recognizable brand identity. A strong brand presence enhances the reliability of a city or destination; visitors may develop loyalty to the brand. Key factors in city branding include cultivating a unique and indispensable identity, crafting this identity into a compelling image, and effectively communicating the brand's value to the intended audience (Herget et al., 2015). In many European countries and cities (eg. Lisbon, Glasgow), exchange students are viewed as advocates for promoting the branding of a particular place (Albino, 2016), however a research gap still exists in the academic literature about the factors of how student advocates can affect the destination's brand. While Asian and American case studies exist on the topic, there is a lack of European ones.

In Estonia, the national branding strategy identifies the exchange students as advertisers of the country. Furthermore, Jarvis (2020) noted that their endorsement aids the country's limited marketing opportunities, generating a positive image organically. A study in Portugal also emphasizes on the opportunities these mobility programs offer for their marketing campaigns (Amaro, 2019). They found that Erasmus students travel actively within the country and highlighted useful proposals (eg. organizing trips within the country for Erasmus students, create services and products for their needs) for further improvement.

The students staying abroad can be considered as advocates of the host country among their friends and family, attracting them to visit the country. Their opinions are based on the experiences they gain, and if they are positive, not only they will share their positive opinion about the country, but they will become loyal to the host country and may return as tourists or trainees, employees (Gracía-Rodríguez & Jiménez, 2015; Csapó & M. Császár, 2021; Amaro et al., 2019; Kéri, 2021; Filipe et al., 2020). Amaro et al. (2020) found that the stronger the emotional connection Erasmus students had with their host country, the higher the probability they communicated their experiences online.

International students – mostly generations Y and Z – frequently use social media, such as Facebook and Instagram to keep their

friends updated and to highlight the positive and negative experiences they encounter. Their social media recommendations and critiques are a significant factor in influencing their followers', families', and friends' opinions about the host country (Amaro, 2019). It is important to encourage exchange students to share their experiences about their host destination with a wide audience for the multiplier effect (Lima, 2007).

It can be seen that the country's and the city's image is an important factor in attracting exchange students, and the better information they have about the location, the more likely they would chose to study there. At the same time, the exchange students themselves can enhance the country's image, they can help promoting Hungary as an attractive place. Erasmus students who built a deep connection to Hungary and love their host city, can be seen as integral part of promoting a destination. They can advocate for the host country, they can promote it as a destination worth to visit, to study and live in.

ERASMUS AND TOURISM

Living abroad is a different experience than visiting a destination as a tourist. Staying for a longer period of time in a specific destination gives students more opportunities to form a deeper relationship with locals, to get to know the local culture better, and to feel like part of the community, which results in having higher well-being than those tourists who only visit the given destination (Dostálová et al., 2019). However, the contrary can also be true: the longer students live in the country, the more negative experiences they may gain, which may result a disillusionment about the host country, as a possible tourist destination.

Student mobility programs, such as the Erasmus+ are seen as beneficial for both host countries and host universities (Kosmaczewska, 2015). The Erasmus Program has a big role not only in education but in tourism as well. According to Csapó and M. Császár (2021), international students have a high tourism motivation. They would like to travel as much as they could, as part of the

intercultural experience they signed up for (Filipe et al., 2020). They are shown to be determined to visit museums and cultural events and to get involved in extracurricular activities (Calvo, 2017). This leads to the conclusion that Erasmus students can be directly classified as tourists depending on the length of their stay (López et al., 2016), and based on their behavior. The results of research conducted in Portugal showed that their international students visited at least five other Portuguese cities. In connection with other studies, they concluded that these students have a positive impact on the host destination's tourism based on the activities they participate in during the length of their stay. Since the students travel in order to learn, the term Academic Tourism can be used to describe this tourism segment (Amaro, 2019; Bento, 2014).

When the Erasmus students chose a destination, the most important characteristics they consider include whether is the destination rich in natural attractions and sights, is safe and secure, is a less visited place by mass tourists, is rich in culture, history, and arts, and does it offer enough events (Lesjak et al., 2015). In contrast, in different research conducted by Pinto et al. (2021), the results suggest that international students do not visit as many events as they could.

Students benefitting from the Erasmus scholarship like to visit the neighboring countries of their host country as well. While the Erasmus Program generates travel, the wish to travel can also be a motivation to apply to study abroad (Gheorghe et al., 2017).

In the research of Demeter et al. (2014), Erasmus students were determined to travel around the host country and visit as many surrounding countries as possible. While the academic opportunities are the scope of Erasmus, student mobility gives a unique opportunity to the participants to visit new places. Csapó and M. Császár (2021) examined the tourist behavior of foreign students and their families and friends. Erasmus+ students travel within Hungary more than any other foreign students (eg. Stipendium Hungaricum students) and their tourism spending is high during their travels. The multiplier effect of the Erasmus students is notable based on the visitors they receive during the length of their stay. If they are visited by some

of their friends and relatives, the number of conventional tourists increases in the destination, which can be used in tourism planning as well (López et al., 2016). As stated in Csapó and M. Császár's research (2021), the tourism spending of international students is generally higher than average. In comparison, Vinklere and Rancāne (2019) show that due to low discretionary income among the foreign students, they tend to spend less on travel, and instead of visiting tourist attractions, they try to gain new experiences in their chosen city. According to Amaro (2019), Erasmus students participate in more events and city tours than foreign students who study in the same city as full-time degree students, since they do not consider themselves new international students. It is recommended to universities that are hosting Erasmus students to work together with Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) to collaborate in promoting the destination by offering trips specifically targeting Erasmus students.

Other factors aside, universities working together with tourism professionals can be considered as a solution to offer a more balanced experience for Erasmus students (Gracía-Rodríguez & Jiménez, 2015). Developing tourism products to introduce new exchange students to the local culture would give them a positive impression of the host country and would lead to development in tourism (Clemente-Ricolfe & Gracía-Pinto, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The results show that Erasmus students may chose a country based on factors that can be internal, social, or on the destination's attractiveness. In the host country, they behave like tourists, travel around the county and the neighboring locations, contributing to the economic growth. Erasmus+ students amongst other things, come to Hungary to meet with new people, to experience new things, and have better prospects in their future.

They are also important as brand advocates as well. The Erasmus exchange students in Hungary can be major influencing factors in shaping the opinion on the host country. Using social media, they

can highlight their experiences, both positive and negative ones. They can recommend a destination to their friends and family or can discourage the visitation of said country. The importance of exchange students is notable. Destination Management Organizations, host universities and country branding professionals should work together to offer a destination that attracts more students, who, in return, may become brand advocates for the country. The Estonian example shows that national branding strategies can also rely on the participants of mobility programs. Promoting Hungary as a place where they can find a wide variety of attractions and activities is a must. The collaborations between the Hungarian universities and foreign ones should be encouraged, as well as a social media strategy that aims international students. Universities and tourism professionals should promote challenges and use social media trends to create an attractive image for foreign students.

The research' limitation is that there are not many current studies on the Erasmus Program students who come to Hungary. While they collaborate on the findings of studies on other countries', as well as studies on general foreign students, the topic needs primer research to give a more comprehensive picture on their motivations, tourist behavior and on their willingness to become brand advocates of their host country. A further research direction is also proposed, in which researchers may examine the connection between the motivations of Erasmus students and certain niche tourism segments (e.g., ecotourism, sport tourism, dark tourism).

Despite these limitations, this study can conclude that Erasmus students have an important role in building a country's and a city's reputation. They can promote their host destination and increase the international tourist arrivals to Hungary.

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APOSZTRÓF

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